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Film History as Media Archaeology: Tracking Digital Cinema.

By Thomas Elsaesser.

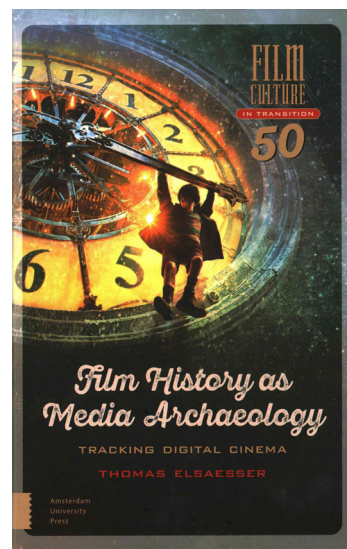
Fryderyk Kwiatkowski

Reviewed book

Thomas Elsaesser
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Thomas Elsaesser produced a book in which he brought altogether his past academic experiences and intellectual influences, especially with reference to film history and other forms of audio-visual narratives. *Film History as Media Archaeology* is a collection of articles, most of which were initially published in various academic journals, supplemented by a few of chapters prepared specifically for the occasion of releasing the book.

All of the papers were based on years of giving teaching courses on early film, media archaeology, and film theory. Complemented by results drawn from numerous research projects, in which the author participated, they were also built on some earlier publications, among which a co-edited *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative* (1990) played a special role. The author's latest book can be seen as a summary and a retrospective of over thirty years of early cinema studies which rapid development and recognition were possible primarily due to the use of media archaeological approach. It also serves as an interesting record of a professional development of the scholar, who has observed the emergence of media archaeology and has had an opportunity to track its evolution.

Elsaesser begins with a statement that "cinema has been an enormous force in the twentieth century – it is the century's memory and its imaginary" (Elsaesser 2016: 18), but immediately adds that in recent scholarship "much of intellectual attention has undeniably moved to digital media, comprising digital television, computer games and hand-held communication devices, mobile screens, and virtual reality" (Elsaesser 2016: 18). One of the major concerns of *Film History as Media Archaeology* is to re-examine and restore the cinema as being now part of the digital media landscape. Thus, the book aims to fill the gap that media scholars have created after the digital revolution took place in as much as they forgot about the cinema by turning to new technological developments. Against this backdrop, it is worth mentioning two figures whose intellectual heritage has contributed into his work most significantly, shaping his approach to the study of both contemporary media and film.

One of them is Michel Foucault, and his name should be the initial point of reference, even for those readers who come across the term “media archaeology” for the first time. The thought of the French scholar has had a tremendous impact on all researchers, including Elsaesser, who started to believe that early cinema was a distinct period in film history. Those scholars have argued that early film should be studied by applying an epistemic framework constructed differently from the one linked with the so-called “classical cinema”. Foucault’s emphasis on the power relations, distrust of teleological narratives of historical progress, myths of single origins, and deconstruction of linear mono-causality are among issues which have had the greatest influence on Elsaesser’s scholarship (Elsaesser 2016: 32-38). He writes that Foucault’s method was almost an inevitable one to use once he “began thinking of the wider implications of what it meant to revise and rewrite traditional film histories, not simply by adding more ‘facts’ or adopting newly rediscovered films into the canon but by setting out to change the very framing of film and cinema within different intellectual, cultural, socio-economic, and technological histories, while positing that at each point in time, starting with the 1890s, one was dealing with an already fully constituted art form with its own logic and rules” (Elsaesser 2016: 53). Elsaesser explains that initially the application of media archaeology into film studies was conceived as a deconstructive project. It was directed towards unveiling presumptions of film history in order to show how it misinterpreted empirical evidence about various kinds of issues: modes of production, institutional organisation, technical advancements and their influence on film style, or narrative (Elsaesser 2016: 43).

Another key-thinker whose scholarship has had a significant impact on Elsaesser’s understanding of media and the way he has studied them, was Walter Benjamin. Elsaesser picks up his idea of modernity which is intrinsically intertwined with his view on city life – its dynamics, socio-economic transformations, transportation inventions, new types of leisure activities – and the cinema. Elsaesser argues that it was possible to attune Benjamin’s understanding of the cinema with archaeological perspective considering his focus on its technological basis and his emphasis on the societal relevance of cinematic experience (Elsaesser 2016: 29). The relationship between modernism and rapid development of technology in the first half of the twentieth century is especially discussed in the chapter *Going “Live”*. Elsaesser shows in it how media archaeology approach can be used to study film by analysing a relatively forgotten German work *Das Lied einer Nacht* (1932). He shows that various media – such as film, radio, or gramophone – were being used during the process of production and entered into an intermedia dialogue with the diegesis of the film. Elsaesser situates his case study

within the broader discussion on the institutional and political context of the process of interconnecting media, their effect on the aesthetic dimension of cinema and the process of fetishisation of technology. Benjamin's thought and the way how he approached cinema is clearly reflected in Elsaesser's examination. Later, for example in the chapter "Archaeologies of Interactivity", the author refers to Benjamin more directly by studying the social dimension of film with special attention to cinematic strategies of engagement and modes of sustaining viewers' attention in the age of modernity. Apart from dozens of other thinkers and academic methods, which have had influence on Elsaesser's scholarship, Foucault and Benjamin endowed him with the sensibility to study cinema both as a technological object and as a social invention.

In the extensive introduction, Elsaesser outlines a broad context of the history of the development of media archaeology with a special interest particular focus on the ways how this reflexive practice has been adopted by himself and by other film scholars. He shows various understandings and approaches to media archaeology by referring to thinkers who have also used the term in their research: Erkki Huhtamo, Jussi Parikka, Siegfried Zielinski, or Bernard Dionysius Geoghegan. This certainly helps a reader unfamiliar with media archaeology to reconstruct possible modes of using it, depending on the particular area of investigation. It also allows Elsaesser to clearly delineate his own way of understanding the term, the theoretical framework that stands behind it, and to discern research goals. The originality of Elsaesser's approach lies in the fact that he has been able to take advantage of theoretical elasticity of media archaeology and to offer a distinguished, but also methodologically consistent, way of studying media. For Elsaesser, bringing back the manifold modes of extinct media uses and exploring their possible future lives and developments is what film history as media archaeology is primarily about. He mostly focuses on the early cinema period, but he also discusses many other issues, given the fact that the book is a collection of essays: the problem of revising classic film thinkers in the light of new media developments, the use of media archaeology by contemporary artists, the dominant paradigm of teleological realism in the film history, the effect of "otherness" or amazement of media, the possible futures of cinema, the migration of cinema into museums, and the revision of media archaeology as an academic practice, among others. There is no point of reviewing all of them; thus, I shall focus only on two problems more closely: firstly, the relationship between media archaeology and digital media, and secondly, the research on the predicted and imagined use of dead media from the early cinema period.

Elsaesser perceives media archaeology as an approach that can be valuable for the studies in digital media. Indeed, after film scholars started to

look through archaeological lenses on dead or forgotten audio-visual media from the early cinema period, it soon appeared that they had been undergoing parallel or similar processes as digital ones in the past few decades. Elsaesser shows that media archaeology can now serve as a fine repository of approaches which could be fruitfully appropriated to studying digital media. He argues that some of the widely-shared assumptions in media archaeology can enhance our understanding of technological conditions that enabled the production of digital media, processes which have been involved in their growth, or the ways in which they have been experienced. He states that with respect to digital media, linear, mono-causal notions of history were not suitable for explaining “the changes one was witnessing, and something like archaeology – i.e., a spatialised concept of time and transformation – seemed more promising and appropriate. In other words, it was as if media archaeology had to step into the breach and – at least temporarily – fill this gap in explanation, confronting bafflement and possibly even panic, fuelled by these ominously short life cycles of almost every device connected with digital media” (Elsaesser 2016: 40). Doubtlessly, media archaeological methods, if incorporated into digital media studies, can be entirely beneficial.

One should acknowledge, however, the limitations of applying this perspective: its provisional character, and the theoretical indetermination or reluctance of their adherents to solidify it into a rigorous method. In academic terms this has strengths and weaknesses. On the one hand, media archaeology does not, for instance, reproduce flaws of grand narratives, which is the case with teleologically centred film history. On the other, media archaeology cannot, by any means, offer or evolve into a new paradigm for studying media in the strict sense of the word. As the author puts it: “[m]edia archaeology is therefore perhaps nothing more than the name for the non-place space and the suspension of temporal flows the film historian needs to occupy when trying to articulate rather than merely accommodate these several alternative, counterfactual, or parallax histories around which any study of the cross-media moving image culture now unfolds”.

We should bear in mind, however, that Elsaesser’s view on the media archaeology practices and the ease with which they can be adapted to investigate digital media environment is historically anchored. The reasons why we are able to see now that digital media and their development fit neatly into non-linear, discontinuous notions of history or a dispersed trajectory of possible uses can be at least twofold. Firstly, the processes that stand behind the expansion of digital technology, which Elsaesser discusses in his book, are much more apparent to us now than they were for scholars who begun to study early film in new ways in the 1980s. This validates, of course, Foucault’s perspective and Elsaesser acknowledges that “his impor-

tance continues to grow in the digital realm" (Elsaesser 2016: 39). Secondly, media archaeologists had to deconstruct traditional film historiography and "excavate" overlooked issues in order to rediscover a complex landscape of audio-visual inventions and people's customs with reference to media experience in early cinema period. Digital media scholars did not have to invest so much intellectual work in order to see that similar phenomena have been defining digital world and its evolution. Had it not been for the emergence of post-Foucaultian approaches, we would have perceived the development of digital media in a different way. In other words, many features of digital technology would not be possible to conceptualise without having an archaeological perspective available in media studies. I am not concerned here with offering a counterfactual story but rather with highlighting that Elsaesser's account of digital media in light of media archaeology is expressed in a very specific moment of media history. The offer he presents, however, is very much understandable if we take into account that the rapid expansion of digital media coincided with the emergence of the archaeological approach. Elsaesser illustrates that media archaeology – and one can add that possibly every historically oriented research – "carries within itself the very principles it is supposed to investigate, thereby running the risk of producing not new knowledge *per se* but reflecting the prejudices and preferences of our present age" (Elsaesser 2016: 365).

Another vital part of Elsaesser's book has been built on the project *Imagined Futures*, which he co-established in Amsterdam (1993-2011). The author writes that the main challenge of the research which he depicts in his book "is to try and give back to a particular past – say, the 1890s or the 1910s – its own future: not the one that history subsequently conferred on it, which in the case of early cinema had been an impoverished and selectively appropriated one, but a future that was imagined (in popular magazines), predicted (by self-promoters like Edison), and fantasized as in Albert Robida's mock-dystopic *Le Vingtième siècle. La vie électrique*" (Elsaesser 2016: 55). This speculative approach has its merits, since it can provide a more complex view on the studied period and give a better understanding of the cultural milieu which it was embedded in: highlight problems that people wished to solve by using technology, their presumptions on science, etc. However, it is both more difficult and risky for a historian to draw conclusions from a speculative research because there are far less tools to verify one's results. On the one hand, the type of research strategy presented by Elsaesser can help us to better understand the possible imagined significance of examined dead media. On the other, it carries a risk of distorting the historical evidence of how a certain technology was originally used, how its purpose was envisioned, or what other advancements it could have anticipated. Elsaesser

does not go too far in his speculations, since he constantly reminds us about the provisional nature of conclusions he proposes. It is worth highlighting, however, the methodological dangers that are indissolubly linked with the type of research he promotes.

Another important aspect of Elsaesser's work is that he cautiously distinguishes all the problems that remain in the centre of every chapter. The author impresses with his erudition, but since the book is a collection of essays, it might be difficult for readers to navigate their way through all the issues, themes, and contexts he alludes to. Nonetheless, the greatest merit of Elsaesser's media archaeological practice should not be recognised in giving some false hopes for establishing a new "method" that could yield "facts" and "definitions". His offer is very rich in its modesty which is especially present when he genuinely exposes the essential concerns of his approach: "I have been inclined to treat media archaeology as a *symptom* rather than a *method*, as a *placeholder* rather than a *research program*, as a *response to various kinds of crises* rather than as a *breakthrough innovative discipline*. I ask myself to what extent is media archaeology itself an *ideology* rather than a way of generating *new kinds of secure knowledge*" (Elsaesser 2016: 354). Although these words can be found at the end of his book, readers should keep them in mind before reading the first chapter in order to grasp a very specific manner of thinking that stands behind his work.

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